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C O N F I D E N T I A L QUITO 000475

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E.O. 12958: DECL: TEN YEARS  
TAGS: PGOV PREL EC  
SUBJECT: CODEL NELSON CONVEYS MESSAGE OF FRIENDSHIP

Classified By: PolOff Jarahn Hillsman for reasons 1.4 (b&d).

**¶11.** (C) Summary: During a February 20 and February 21 visit to Quito, Senator Bill Nelson (D-Fl) reiterated a message of friendship and continued engagement with Ecuador in a meeting with President Correa, Foreign Minister Espinosa, and senior Correa-advisor Fernando Bustamante, and in a brief press conference with local reporters. Senator Nelson highlighted counter-narcotics cooperation and development as areas of mutual interest and expressed his hope that ATPA benefits will be extended beyond June. Correa and his team welcomed the Senator,s message of friendship but raised concerns about reduced USG foreign assistance to Ecuador, Colombia,s coca fumigation along the border, and the need for immigration reform in the United States. Senator Nelson,s comments about the Manta Forward Operating Location (FOL) were met with silence from Correa. CODEL Nelson, en route to Peru, visited the Manta FOL to learn more about USG interagency and international anti-narcotics efforts. End Summary.

Correa Meeting Atmospherics Positive

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**¶12.** (C) Senator Nelson, accompanied by Ambassador Jewell, two Senate staffers, WHA/AND Ecuador Desk Officer (notetaker), and one military escort, was greeted warmly by President Correa who apologized profusely for keeping the Senator waiting due to a national security meeting that ran long. After Correa,s introductions of Foreign Minister Espinosa and senior security advisor Fernando Bustamante and USG introductions, Senator Nelson expressed greetings from Senator Reid and other members of the recent CODEL to Ecuador and appreciation for Correa,s hospitality. The Senator opened the meeting by explaining that his mission was similar to that of CODEL Reid: to build a personal relationship with Correa and to strengthen our positive bilateral relationship. He expressed the desire to collaborate in areas of shared interest and to constructively work out problems when they arise. Correa welcomed the comments and replied that he is ready to collaborate on anything of mutual benefit. Senator Nelson and FM Espinosa agreed that protecting the environment is an area where there is much room for collaboration. The Senator explained that he would see first-hand the effects of deforestation on his trip to Peru; FM Espinosa mentioned positively a regional USAID environmental project in which Ecuador would participate (note: the Amazon Basin Initiative).

Correa Chuckles at Press, Silent on Manta

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¶13. (C) Senator Nelson shared with Correa some of the questions raised in the press conference earlier that morning as well as his corresponding answers. Correa and other GOE officials laughed when the Senator noted the question about visiting Ecuador because it is seen as a "danger, due to Correa's relationship with Chavez," commiserating about the press, hunt for sensational headlines. Correa stated that the U.S. is considered a good friend and Ecuador's best trade partner, later adding that he & loves8 the American people and appreciates their honesty. Correa and his team made no comment when Senator Nelson explained the press, question about the GOE's intention not to renew the Manta FOL agreement as well as his response expressing respect for GOE views while noting the FOL's value and small footprint.

Reduced USG Foreign Assistance to Ecuador "Unfair"

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¶14. (C) Correa expressed concern about decreased levels of USG foreign assistance to Ecuador, labeling it &unfair8 given Ecuador's counter-narcotics cooperation. FM Espinosa added that it is very hard for Ecuador to understand the cuts when Congress just approved over \$500 million for Plan Colombia. She explained that the GOE had spent heavily on counter-narcotics programs only to see a decrease in USG assistance to Ecuador. Bustamante highlighted the difficulties created by USG assistance cuts, claiming it sends a negative public message about the USG view of the new Correa administration. Senator Nelson explained the stress of the Iraq war on the budget and vowed to resist further U.S. foreign assistance budget cuts.

Extension of ATPA Benefits Important for Both Countries

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¶15. (C) FM Espinosa said that extension of trade preferences (ATPA) beyond June is very important for both Ecuador and the U.S. ATPA creates jobs and thus prevents a rise in coca growers and illegal immigrants, Espinosa noted. Correa seconded Espinosa's comments, adding that since Ecuador is investing in counter-narcotics (despite the many other pressing concerns in Ecuador), ATPA is the minimum compensation for the GOE's efforts. Senator Nelson responded that while he cannot predict the Bush administration's stance on ATPA extension, he joins Senator Reid in hoping to see an extension beyond June. The Senator noted cut flowers exported from Ecuador reach Florida first as they make their way to the U.S. market, creating jobs in his state through ATPA. However, he noted that ATPA was originally intended only to be a bridge to a more permanent Free Trade Agreement, and that he was hopeful one could be reached with Ecuador. Espinosa cautiously endorsed a &Fair Trade Agreement8 and Correa quoted Pat Buchanan as saying that -hing is more anti-American than free trade.8

Tensions Still High Over Colombian Aerial Eradication

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¶16. (C) Correa discussed &the effects of Plan Colombia8, particularly the aerial fumigations conducted by the GOC using &American aircraft8. Correa and Espinosa expressed dissatisfaction with the current situation, their desire that Colombia respect a ten kilometer &no spray8 zone when fumigating along the border, and the possibility that the GOE may have to file a suit against Colombia at the Hague. They urged U.S. intervention, noting that the GOE had made every attempt to separate their public spat with Colombia and their relationship with Washington. Espinosa noted that this was becoming increasingly more difficult given U.S. funding for Plan Colombia. Senator Nelson listened to their concerns and said that he would raise the issue with Colombian President Alvaro Uribe.

USG Immigration Reform a Concern for the Correa Administration

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¶17. (C) Espinosa expressed GOE hope for immigration reform to normalize Ecuadorian immigrants living in the US. Senator

Nelson shared that he had voted for immigration reform but also explained that the moment may not be right to tackle the issue in the U.S. given the sensitive politics surrounding the issue of immigration. That said, the Senator predicted immigration reform in the not too distant future.

SENATOR NELSON TELLS PRESS: OPPORTUNITY FOR GOOD RELATIONS

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¶8. (U) Senator Nelson in a February 21 Embassy press conference highlighted positive U.S.-Ecuador relations, and noted that he had stopped in Ecuador on a regional tour to speak with President Correa. The Senator expressed his hope for an extension of ATPA benefits beyond June and commended Ecuador's excellent cooperation with the U.S. in the areas of counter-narcotics, and economic and social development (particularly through USAID projects). When questioned whether this visit was prompted by a fear in the U.S. that Ecuador was becoming a danger due to Correa's relationship with Chavez, Senator Nelson responded with a clear "no." Asked about the Correa decision not to renew the Manta FOL agreement, Senator Nelson said the USG will "do what the GOE wants" regarding the Manta FOL. He then explained to the press that the Manta FOL is misunderstood in Ecuador as a large &military base8 while, in reality, the U.S. has a small military presence at an Ecuadorian air base in Manta that focuses on helping Ecuador in the drug fight.

Senator Nelson Tours the Manta FOL

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¶9. (C) Senator Nelson traveled to Manta, Ecuador in order to meet the current leadership of the Manta FOL and to learn about the FOL's role in USG interagency and international counter-narcotics efforts. The Senator received a Command Briefing and facilities tour demonstrating the FOL's capabilities and importance in drug interdiction and border control.

Comment

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¶10. (C) Senator Nelson's trip to Ecuador served the dual purpose of demonstrating high-level USG interest in Ecuador and underscoring our repeated message of engagement with the new Correa administration. Additionally, Senator Nelson kept positive USG messages on counter-narcotics and the Manta FOL in the press.

¶11. (U) Senator Bill Nelson cleared this message.  
JEWELL